

July 1, 2005

Dear Friend:

This past week, President Bush addressed the country about the ongoing war in Iraq. This speech was a chance to be straight with the American people about the current situation, and to give us confidence in the future of the mission, in the future of Iraq, and the future of our soldiers serving there.

Unfortunately, the President did not use this opportunity to announce benchmarks for success in Iraq, which would aid in determining when our troops can return home. The Iraq war has generated tremendous costs: more than 1,700 American soldiers killed, more than 13,000 wounded, more than \$200 billion of U.S. taxpayer dollars spent, and damage done to the reputation of the United States.

The growing sentiment that the American people are not being given straight answers on Iraq was not dispelled by this speech. On the contrary, the President attempted to link Iraq and the terrorist attacks on 9/11—despite the strong statement of the Commission on Intelligence Capabilities Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction that no such link exists. For more information on Iraq, please [click here](#).

A link that the President did not make, however, is the link between the sacrifices made by our soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the importance of taking care of our soldiers when they return home. The recent announcement by the Department of Veterans' Affairs that a billion-dollar shortfall in veterans' healthcare funding would necessitate emergency funding exemplified this.

On Thursday, VA Secretary Jim Nicholson came before the House Veterans Affairs Committee to explain the shortfall, which came as no surprise to many members of Congress. I explained to the Secretary that the shortfall was inevitable due to the constant underfunding of VA healthcare in recent years, and read to him the dates of letters sent to the President, the Secretary, and the House leadership requesting increased funding due to the large numbers of servicemembers returning from Afghanistan and Iraq. I also explained that the inadequate funding is having direct consequences in New Mexico, where many veterans must wait months to get an appointment at the VA, and where over 4,000 veterans have been prevented from enrolling in the VA healthcare system. Amazingly, the Secretary failed to take any responsibility for the funding shortfall.

Before adjourning for Independence Day, I was pleased that the House passed an emergency bill to help fill the veterans' healthcare shortfall. The bill, which included \$975 million, is a good start, but the VA will need much more than that—about \$1.7 billion more—to fully address the shortfall for the past two years. I have again asked for hearings on H.R. 515, the Assured Funding for Veterans Health Care Act, which would require mandatory funding for VA health care instead of the current discretionary funding process that is subject to the whims of any particular administration. I look forward to working with my colleagues on the Veterans' Committee and Secretary Nicholson to see that this issue is given the attention it needs. The

183,000 veterans living in New Mexico deserve no less. For more information on veterans' healthcare funding, please [click here](#).

Very truly yours,

Tom Udall
Member of Congress